Abstract

"Objectivism," the view that valid knowledge can be obtained only by impersonal rules of procedure, constituted, for Michael Polanyi in his theory of "personal knowledge", the pathology of modern thought. In science objectivism was manifested in the form of positivism, the appeal to the "objective" procedures of observation, testing and experiment. In philosophy, objectivism takes several forms, perhaps the most widespread spread of which is that of linguistic analysis, the appeal to the "objective" rules of usage. This paper attempts to reveal the objectivist premises of a recent example of such analysis, that of Joe Green's "The Concept of Reason in Hirst's Forms of Knowledge." (*The Journal of Educational Thought, Vol. 19, No. 2, August, 1985.)*

Résumé

L' "objectivisme", cette théorie qui veut que la connaissance véritable ne s'acquiert que par des règles impersonnelles de procédure, constitue pour Michael Polanyi dans sa théorie de la "connaissance personnelle", la maladie de la pensée moderne. Dans les sciences, l'objectivisme a pris la forme du positivisme qui fait appel à une méthode dite "objective" fondée sur l'observation, la mise à l'épreuve et l'expérience. En philosophie, l'objectivisme s'est manifesté de plusieurs facons dont la plus répandue peut-être est celle de l'analyse linguistique qui repose sur les règles "objectives" de l'usage. Dans son article, l'auteur tente de démontrer les prémisses objectivistes d'un exemple récent d'une telle analyse, soit celle de Joe Green dans "The Concept of Reason in Hirst's Forms of Knowledge." (Revue de la pensée éducative, vol. 19, no. 2, aout 1985.)

Dennis Cato *

THE PHILOSOPHIC PRETENCE OF LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS: A POLANYIAN PERSPECTIVE ON JOE GREEN'S DRAWING OUT PAUL HIRST'S CONCEPT OF REASON

Introduction

In his paper, "The Concept of Reason in Hirst's Forms of Knowledge," [1] Joe Green attempts to uncover Paul Hirst's concept of reason, a concept, he maintains, "which has eluded clear meaning." [2] According to Green, the reason why it has eluded clear meaning is that "one encounters a galaxy of interdependent concepts, including objectivity, the given, the facts, all of which lie together in a special kind of conceptual matrix, the logic of which may be called 'its reason.'" [3] What Green wants to do is "to draw out this notion of reason through an examination of its aforementioned components as it constitutes an essential feature of Hirst's theory of forms of knowledge and liberal education." [4] By way of drawing out this notion of reason through an examination of those interdependent components constituting that special kind of conceptual matrix, Green points out:

> I take reason to be logically secondary to its components of objectivity, the given, and facts, though these are in many ways equally abstract. I say this because they are more immediate and accessible concepts in so far as they are employed daily in quite meaningful ways in our language games . . . Reason, on the other hand, appears to be logically dependent upon the ways in which forms of understanding

---

* Pierrefonds Comprehensive High School, Pierrefonds, Quebec, Canada

confer upon it its meaning. [5]

Three components emerge from Green's analysis: (1) the "galaxy of interdependent concepts," that is, "objectivity," "the given," and "facts," all as they are employed in our "language games;" (2) the concept of "reason" which is both logically secondary to the galaxy as well as being logically dependent upon; (3) the "forms of understanding" which confer upon reason its meaning.

In his theory of "personal knowledge" in which the knower (a) relies tacitly upon subsidiary clues (b) in the act of making them bear upon or of integrating them into that reality (c) which they denote or jointly constitute, Michael Polanyi rejected a narrowly conceived, positivistic view of the process of attaining scientific knowledge on the grounds that it failed to account for (a) and (b). In the absence of a recognition of the activity of the knower, the process of scientific thought became an empty caricature of itself. In addition, however, Polanyi also rejected linguistic analysis as a narrowly conceived "objectivist" view of the process of philosophical thought, but here on the grounds that it failed to account for (c). In the absence of a recognition of a reality which was independent of, yet attainable by the knower, the process of philosophical thought becomes detached from its own object and is reduced, as a consequence, to an empty caricature of itself. Where a positivistic science sought to attain scientific knowledge by means of the application of "impersonal" rules of procedure embodied in observation, testing and experiment, so a linguistic philosophy seeks to attain philosophical knowledge by means of the application of equally "impersonal" rules of usage. For Polanyi, such philosophizing constituted little more than a "philosophic pretence," one which originated in "an overriding desire to avoid reference to metaphysical notions or at least to cover these up under a cloak of nominalist respectability." [6] In his view, the nominalist conception of language as consisting merely of "a set of convenient symbols used according to the conventional rules of a 'language game'" fails in the face of the problem of universals, of how it is that "the same term can apply to a series of indeterminately variable particulars." [7] In the theory of personal knowledge the problem can be resolved only by reference to that upon which the terms bear, only by "accrediting the speaker's sense of fitness for judging that his words express the reality he seeks to express." [8] In the absence of such commitment to and acknowledgement of that reality, the linguistic philosopher can appeal only to his "linguistic rules," which, for Polanyi, are nothing more than "a pseudosubstitution for the things referred to in its terms." [9] The reason why such rules are nothing more than a pseudosubstitution for the things referred to in their terms is that there are no such rules. As Polanyi points out,

> 'Grammar' is precisely the total of linguistic rules which can be observed by using a language without attending to the things referred to. The purpose of the philosophic pretence of being merely concerned with grammar is to contemplate and analyse reality, while denying the act of doing so. [10]

This paper seeks to show that Green will not succeed in drawing out Hirst's concept of reason because, (1) his desire to avoid reference to metaphysical notions such as an independent reality will drive him to reduce his galaxy of interdependent concepts to a set of convenient symbols used according to the conventional rules of a "language game," and, (2) the galaxy so reduced will then enter upon a viciously circular relationship with his "forms of understanding" which come to serve as pseudosubstitutions for the study of things referred to in their terms. In other words, Green will not succeed in drawing out Hirst's concept of reason because Hirst does not have a concept of reason, at least one that is distinguishable from those "linguistic rules" which enable him, in elaborating his theory of knowledge, to contemplate and analyse reality while denying the act of doing so. In showing these things, I shall employ Green's subtitles.

Rejection of Absolutism

Green begins by giving a brief description of Hirst's "forms of knowledge," each of which constitutes "a class of true propositions or statements that test out as coherent and distinct from other classes." [11] The seven distinct forms derive their status by reference to the possession of a set of concepts central to the form, a distinctive logical structure, and a set of expressions which are testable against experience in a way that provides distinctive truth criteria. Green points out that Hirst, in developing his theory of the forms of knowledge, "takes pains to make clear that he rejects the doctrines of metaphysical and epistemological realism," that "his theory is not a by-product of any metaphysical doctrine." [12] It is not by reference to such metaphysical doctrines that the "conceptual scheme," that set of concepts peculiar to the form, is derived but rather by reference to "our forms of life." In its turn, the "form of life" comes to feature as "a metaphor denoting agreement among users of a language that certain rules are to be followed in their employment of that language. By so agreeing, tacitly or otherwise, they participate in a form of life." [13] It could not be clearer. If the nature of the "conceptual schemes" which distinguish the "forms of knowledge" by virtue of their embodying a "concept of reason" central to the form, a concept which, in turn, can be drawn out only by reference to those "certain rules" which are agreed upon by the users of a language who thereby participate in a "form of life," Green must show us what those rules are. What are they?

Unfortunately, Green does not reveal at this point just what these rules might be, the rules which the participants in a form of life employ daily in quite meaningful ways in their "language games." He rather embarks on an account of Hirst's rejection of "ultimacy" in respect to the conceptual schemes. The schemes, for Hirst, are not to be understood as temporarily invariant Kantian forms, nor are they to be viewed as some sort of Piagetian meta-cultural entities. Using the example of evolutionism and creationism as conflicting conceptual schemes, Green points out that they will vary even between "ethnically similar individuals who try to understand each other by means of language emanating from different forms of life." [14] The difficulty here is that the rejection of ultimacy is self-contradictory. For Polanyi, as has been seen, the use of language necessarily implies accrediting one's sense of fitness for judging that one's assertions express the reality one seeks to express. One cannot, in other words, make an assertion and simultaneously withhold one's affirmation of its fitness in respect to that which the assertion both presupposes and denotes. From within the perspective of the assertion, the affirmation of fitness necessarily constitutes a claim to "ultimacy" in the sense that one's conceptual scheme, on the one hand, and the reality it seeks to comprehend, on the other, are congruent and that the assertion, as a consequence, is true. In Polanyian language, the tacit framework upon which one subsidiarily relies in attending focally to that which one affirms to be an aspect of reality cannot, in that act, be viewed impersonally or as an object of doubt. Green is no exception to this. In asserting that conceptual schemes vary as they emanate from different forms of life, he accredits his sense of fitness for judging that his assertion expresses the reality which he seeks to express. But to make the assertion of the variability of conceptual schemes and to claim that this variability exists, Green must be speaking from the perspective of some further conceptual scheme, one which supervenes variability and to which he gives ultimacy but which, oddly, contains the view that all conceptual schemes lack ultimacy. In other words, in accrediting that his assertion expresses the reality he seeks to express, Green's assertion contains the denial of the relationship between assertion and reality.

In his analysis of Hirst's rejection of absolutism, Green proceeds from self-contradiction to incoherence. Where conceptual schemes are held to vary as to the forms of life, where Hirst himself is seen to be "functioning within a conceptual framework which is primarily a function of culture" [15] and therefore can make no claim to share or even understand the frameworks of other cultures, he simultaneously points out that for Hirst "there can be no meaningful concept of knowledge apart from its public testability against experience, as experience is shared in one form of life or another and expressed in public languages." [16] The difficulty with the public testability criterion of meaning is that if the form of life is not shared, the tests against experience will be irrelevant since, under the ruling, they are incomprehensible to those not sharing that form of life. There can be no settling a dispute over what constitutes a meaningful concept of knowledge since such a concept is derived from a conceptual scheme structured according to a shared form of life, and here the form of life is not shared. On the other hand, if the form of life is shared, the tests against experience are not irrelevant but they are unnecessary since such sharing, by definition, postulates *a priori* agreement as to what constitutes a meaningful concept of knowledge. Here the tests against experience become redundant, self-confirmatory exercises.

Egress from the dilemma posed by the rejection of absolutism might appear in the form of some supervening test against experience which would serve to reconcile the conflicting forms of life from which the discordant conceptual schemes emanated. Perhaps, if Green would reveal the content of those "certain rules" which are agreed to by the users of a language, a start might also be made. But Green takes his leave from the issue and, strangely in view of the temporal, cultural and individual variations he has discerned in the conceptual schemes, next proceeds to ask: "How can Hirst's theory provide the conditions for objectivity in the formation of judgments based on knowledge?" [17]

Objectivity and Judgment

In answer to the question about the conditions for objectivity in the formation of judgments based on knowledge, Green maintains

> Any such claims must necessarily be proclaimed under conditions which subject it to judgements of truth and validity within the context of the form of experience from which it issues. A part of any such context is, of course, a conceptual scheme which includes the criteria for objectivity in the judgement of a claim to knowledge. [18]

The formula for objectivity in the formation of judgments based on knowledge reduces to the view that such judgments are objective if they are true and valid in terms of the conceptual scheme under which they are proclaimed. If a judgment based on knowledge is not proclaimed from within the conceptual scheme from which it ought to issue, if, say, a natural science judgment was employed in a claim to moral knowledge, then such a judgment would be neither true nor valid and, of course, it would not then be "objective." Put differently, the conditions for objectivity in the formation of judgments based on knowledge reside in the fact that such judgments are, in fact, based on knowledge, since that is what "objective" means, but the formula provides no means for assessing whether this is, indeed, the case. Salvation from the tautological relationship Green has erected between "knowledge" and "objectivity" requires that he explicate what he means by "truth" and "validity."

Since Hirst's theory is not a by-product of any metaphysical doctrine — he has rejected the doctrines of epistemological and metaphysical realism — judgments of truth and validity can be

assessed only the the consensus criterion. Green quotes Hirst to the effect that "Only where there is public agreement about the classification and categorization of experience and thought can we hope for any objectivity within them." [19] What the "public agreement" criterion reduces to is that judgments based on knowledge are objective, true and valid if people say they are. The difficulty that arises here, of course, is that not just anybody counts as being part of the appropriate "public" and the criterion for assessing membership in the appropriate public is not itself derived from the public agreement criterion. In other words, while judgments of truth and validity may be assessed only by those lucky enough to enjoy possession of the criteria of objectivity, truth and validity, it is never revealed just how it is known that one possesses these criteria. This knowledge claim, one must suppose, is based upon the classification and categorization of experience which is *not* public.

The impotence of the public criterion agreement in confrontation with actual cases becomes patent when Green proceeds to illustrate the criterion in action by way of assessing the truth and validity of the statement "Alfred loves Karen very much." How can we tell if Alfred loves Karen very much? The first thing we should take note of, according to Green, is that "The criteria for the objective judgment of statements in, say, mathematics or physical sciences would be entirely inappropriate for judging the statement." [20] Having grasped this point, we must then understand that the statement's "criteria for objective testability would hinge on a shared concept of love, which might include such matters as Alfred's statements about Karen, his display of affection towards her, the frequency of his amorous contacts with her, and perhaps, though not necessarily, his marriage to her." [21] In other words, if there were public agreement about what criteria had to be satisfied for the application of the concept, and, finally, if there were public agreement that Alfred satisfied these criteria, then our claim to knowledge in respect to the statement "Alfred loves Karen very much" would have objectivity, truth and validity. The logic of presupposition, however, in no way establishes the claim to knowledge, for the issue is that of determining *whether* Alfred's statements, displays, contacts, and even marriage actually established that he loved Karen very much. All of Green's public criteria might be satisfied and yet it might transpire that, after all, Alfred didn't love Karen very much much but married her for her money. Or, better yet, he might have been trying to fool people like Green who insist on reducing reality to an examination of the logic of statements about reality.

Finally, Green concludes his exploration of Hirst's notion of objectivity and judgment by responding to a view of R.D. Smith that the forms of knowledge are more appropriate to questions of meaning rather than to those of knowledge. In respect to the statement "Paul knows art," he points to a number of "truth criteria by which a form-specific type of objectivity may be employed in judging the statement." [22] Among these criteria Green cites things like background and foreground, highlights, intensity of colour and so on, criteria which he maintains "are understood rather objectively among those who participate in this form of life, i.e., among those who use the language of this particular form of experience." [23]

The first point which might be made in respect to Green's truth criteria which are understood rather objectively by those who use the language of artistic experience is that such criteria are not present in works of art in the same way that dark clouds are present on a rainy day. It is not their simple presence but rather the assessment that they are indeed present and are so in a manner and degree which satisfies the concept of "art" which is at issue. Objectivity, in other words, attaches to the assessment, not to the criteria. It is, of course, a matter of further assessment whether Paul, in fact, knows art. A second point is that of the meaning-knowledge dichotomy: Smith holds that

the forms of knowledge are appropriate to questions of meaning where Green maintains they are equally appropriate to questions of knowledge. As Polanyi and others have shown, there can be no knowledge without a supporting paradigm or conceptual framework in terms of which such knowledge has meaning and, indeed, in terms of which it is counted as an item of knowledge. The geocentric theory of Ptolemy was not knowledge for Copernicus because it was meaningless. The dichotomy, in other words, is itself meaningless save to those who reify context-free, "objective" criteria of knowledge. A further point in respect to the truth criteria which are understood rather objectively by those who use the language of artistic experience is that Hirst himself didn't know what they were. For Hirst, such statements as "Paul knows art" appeared to have "properties logically related to propositions having related empirical tests," but the reason he supposed this is that "there is nothing to be gained by restricting it to one particular form of judgment." [24] Finally, of course, the truth criteria which purportedly lend objectivity to the truth criteria employed by those who use the language of the artistic form of experience in judging the statement "Paul knows art" are identical to those which supposedly lent objectivity to the statement "Alfred loves Karen very much." If, in other words, there is public agreement about the concept of "art," what criteria have to be satisfied for the application of the concept, and finally, public agreement that Paul, in fact, satisfies these criteria, then the judgment would have objectivity, truth and validity. But, as with Alfred and Karen, an examination of the logic of statements about Paul and art does not establish whether he knows art.

Beyond establishing a relation of tautology between objectivity, truth, validity, public agreement, and judgments based on knowledge, Green has not revealed just how Hirst's theory provides for objectivity in the formation of judgments based on knowledge. Nevertheless, he now directs his attention to the last of that galaxy of interdependent concepts one encounters in drawing out Hirst's concept of reason, that of "the given."

The Given

(a) "The Given" and the "notion of objectivity." "Hirst believes that the notion of objectivity is an entailment of reason in his theory," Green points out,

> and moreover that reason is inextricably tied to a concept which he refers to as 'the given.' A certain tension is implicit in judgements about knowledge in situations where the criteria of objectivity and agreement on 'the given' are not clearly agreed upon, or where they are not clearly understood, if even tacitly. [25]

In view of the fact that Green nowhere reveals what the thing is, a certain tension can be seen to arise in judgments about the concept of "the given" itself. In the absence of those doctrines of metaphysical and epistemological realism, "the given" must be identical to those unrevealed "certain rules" which the users of a language agree upon and by virtue of which they participate in a "form of life." What sense is there then to Green's view that a certain tension is implicit in judgments about knowledge where the criteria of objectivity and agreement on "the given" are not clearly agreed upon or where they are not clearly understood, since, if they were not agreed upon and not clearly understood they would not be the criteria of "the given." One must suppose that whatever else "the given" might be, it is, at the very least, given. Again, since the "criteria of objectivity" have been seen to reduce to the public agreement criterion, just what might the distinction be between such criteria and the concept of "the given" since that is what the concept means? Still further, since the notion of objectivity is an entailment of reason which, simultaneously, is inextricably tied to "the given," where reason, in other words, is reason only in so far as it

functions in conformity with the notion of objectivity and "the given," just what is the distinction between objectivity, "the given," and the concept of reason itself?

Green attempts to relieve the tension in judgments about knowledge in situations where the criteria of objectivity and "the given" are not clearly agreed upon by reference to the mathematical form of knowledge, a form, he maintains, derived from axioms which "are arbitrarily chosen so as to provide a foundation for a particular mathematical system." [26] By way of illustrating this arbitrariness he points to the axioms of Euclidean geometry which "are no longer taken as self-evident truths as they formerly were," with the result that "we see in the 'most objective' of Hirst's forms the extent to which objectivity and the given perform a dance-of-life-and-death in the interest of reason." [27]

Passing by the common sense point that the performance of the dance-of-life-and-death is incoherent since the dancing partners are identical, as well as the logical point that, since the "most objective" of Hirst's forms is derived from axioms which are arbitrarily chosen, the axioms of the philosophical form in general and Green's views in particular must descend to the level of the idiosyncratic, one need only ask why the axioms of Euclidean geometry are no longer taken as self-evident truths as they formerly were. Since Hirst and Green have rejected the doctrines of metaphysical and epistemological realism, since their theory is not the by-product of any metaphysical doctrine, will they explain on just what grounds the change from Euclidean to non-Euclidean axioms did take place?

Unfortunately, Green is silent on the nature of conceptual change — since the truth-tests of the forms of knowledge are little more than mechanisms of self-confirmation, it is difficult to see just how Green could accommodate the concept — but turns next to "the problem of reason at the practical level." [28] As the last waltz in the dance-of-life-and-death between the notion of objectivity and the given, the problem is how "to recognize the form of knowledge in which a judgment is to be rendered and to find agreement in the light of the given." [29] The difficulty, of course, in recognizing the form of knowledge in which a judgment is to be rendered and, by extension, the problem of reason at the practical level, is that such recognition presupposes some *further* form of knowledge containing within it its own criteria of objectivity and the given, in terms of which the various judgments are assigned their appropriate forms. But in the theory of the forms of knowledge there is no further form and, as a consequence, the problem of reason at the practical level, the problem of how we recognize things as being of a particular sort, goes unresolved. Where both "objectivity" and "the given" in the form of knowledge are identical to what is agreed upon, Green's clarification of the problem of reason at the practical level reduces to the claim that the solution lies in recognizing the form of knowledge in which a judgment is rendered, which is impossible, and to find agreement ("objectivity") in the light of agreement ("the given"), which is absurd.

(b) "The Given" and "The Facts."

In the absence of those doctrines of metaphysical and epistemological realism the concept of "the given" has been seen to be analytical with the notion of objectivity which in turn was analytical with that public agreement on those unexplicated "certain principles" which the users of a language agree upon and by virtue of which they participate in a "form of life," which, to close the tautological circle, is itself analytical with the notion of objectivity and the concept of "the given." We now find that "the facts" suffer a similar fate. "The facts," in other words, are

facts if the people who share a form of life say they are the facts. Green effects the reduction in three steps.

The first step in understanding the concept of "the facts" is to realize that "meaning is conferred upon the concept of a fact only after consideration has been given to what is involved in knowing facts." [30] Secondly, what is involved in knowing facts includes, "at the very least, the ability to identify certain names and to understand certain concepts used in the formulation of a simple sentence which purports to state a fact, such as, 'Ronald Reagan is President of the United States.'" [31] Thirdly, the only way to know whether a simple sentence which purports to state a fact actually does so is by "an understanding of the truth criteria by which any statement of fact would be objectively substantiated." [32] Green does not explain just how we are to apply the truth criteria by which any statement which purports to state a fact would be objectively substantiated, just how it is that we are to establish congruence between "the given" and "the facts." The reason, perhaps, why he does not do so is that it is a false problem since its terms are identities. In other words, the truth criteria by which any statement of fact would be objectively substantiated are identical to the criteria for objectivity in the judgment of a claim to knowledge, that is, where there is public agreement about the classification and categorization of experience according to those "certain rules" which jointly constitute "the given" which, in its turn and in its various manifestations, constitutes a "form of life." To understand the truth criteria by which any statement of fact would be objectively substantiated, in other words, is to understand that "the facts" are facts if the people who share a "form of life" say they are the facts. Everything is as it is, and analysis leaves it as it is. In his attempts to adjudicate congruence between "the given" and "the facts," Green passes from tautology to incoherence. "It is unclear," he observes by way of farewell to the conundrum, "whether Hirst believes that mathematics, as a form of knowledge, contains or includes facts, or whether there are facts in the real world which bear upon mathematics as a form." [33] But Green takes pains to make it clear that Hirst took pains to make clear that he rejects the doctrines of metaphysical and epistemological realism, that his theory is not a by-product of any metaphysical doctrine. There is, therefore, no "real world" which can bear upon mathematics as a form of knowledge, or if there is, Green cannot talk about it and remain consistent with his own criteria. He is left, necessarily, with the view that the form contains or includes the facts, but he has failed to show what coherent content the concept might possess to say nothing of the nature of its relationship to "the given."

Conclusion

I have attempted to reveal the "philosophic pretence" contained in Green's effort to draw out Hirst's concept of reason by reference to Polanyi's theory of "personal knowledge." I have attempted to show that the pretence involves employing "linguistic rules" which turned out to be merely pseudosubstitutions for the things referred to in their terms which enabled Green to contemplate and analyse reality while denying the act of doing so.

NOTES

[1] Green, Joe L. (1985, August). The concept of reason in Hirst's forms of knowledge. *The Journal of Educational Thought*, 19,(2), 109-116.

[2] Ibid., 109.

3   Ibid.

4   Ibid.

5   Ibid.

6   Polanyi, Michael. (1962). *Personal knowledge: towards a post-critical philosophy.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 113.

7   Ibid.

8   Ibid.

9   Ibid.

10   Ibid., 114.

11   Green, op.cit., 109.

12   Ibid.

13   Ibid.

14   Ibid.

15   Ibid.

16   Ibid., 112.

17   Ibid.

18   Ibid.

19   Ibid.

20   Ibid.

21   Ibid.

22   Ibid., 113.

23   Ibid.

24   Hirst, Paul. (1974). The forms of knowledge re-visited. In *Knowledge and the curriculum.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 87.

25   Green, op. cit., 113.

26   Ibid., 114.

27   Ibid.

28   Ibid.

29   Ibid.

30   Ibid.

31   Ibid.

32   Ibid.

33   Ibid., 115.